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by Frank Wisner

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

5/31/78
Bjm

DATE: May 26, 1978
Place: Buenos Aires
Time:

SUBJECT: Human Rights and United States Relations with Argentina

PARTICIPANTS: Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
David D. Newsom
ARA/ECA Fred Rondon
ADCM Jack Higgins

Robert Cox, Buenos Aires Herald

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The Under Secretary met with Mr. Cox for approximately 45 minutes. He asked Cox for his estimate of future political developments in Argentina. Cox said the major issue both internally and externally was human rights. The editor said that the question of "disappeareds" was a sputtering time bomb; that the GOA was aware of its danger and was thrashing around and wrestling with the problem of how to deal with the problem.

Cox said that nobody outside of Argentina could understand that it is impossible for President Videla to make decisions alone and make them stick. Cox described the tri-force nature of the Junta whose decisions must be unanimous; the strength of the hardliners in the military, political ambitions of Admiral Massera as among the factors forcing the President to arrive at a majority consensus before decisions could be implemented.

He said that Interior Minister Harguindeguy, with whom Cox has had frequent meetings, now impresses him as an honest, sincere man who would keep his word, once given.

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Cox said previously he had thought that Harguindeguy was simply a ruthless hardliner but he had changed his mind and now believed that Harguindeguy was sincere in his efforts to curb abuses by the police and military.

Cox said he felt that the situation in Argentina was improving and cited a considerable decrease in reports to the Herald of cases of disappearances or kidnappings.

Asked by Mr. Newsom his opinion of U.S. policy vis-a-vis Argentina, Cox said the past cannot be wiped out or relived and he believed it was important for the United States to understand this fact. He said that terrible things had happened here and that he did not believe that the military would move toward any wholesale release of prisoners in the foreseeable future. The memories of what had happened after Peronist former President Campora (who was in office as a result of elections called by the Lanusse Military Government) emptied Argentine jails in a general amnesty are still fresh. That the general release of prisoners, in the opinion of the GOA, caused the most dangerous upsurge of terrorism that Argentina has ever faced and the GOA was not about to make the same mistake twice.

Cox said that in his opinion the United States should keep insisting on the importance of the reinstitution of legal procedures, and the damages to Argentina's image caused by incidents such as the kidnappings of the nuns and mothers. In this sense, he thought USG pressures had been useful and effective. He cautioned against tactics which had no other effect than to arouse the hardliners. He said the hardliners were the greatest obstacle to progress in Argentina.

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